

## *Exercise is essential to equine health*



A horse's body is designed to be in motion. In a natural condition, he might sleep only 4 hours out of 24. When we place a horse in a stall or small pen, we take away his ability to move well and this can be quite detrimental to his health over time. Heart and lungs require exercise to remain functioning properly. Shallow breathing and stagnant circulation reduce the exchange of oxygen in the blood and impair stamina.

The heart is not the only blood moving mechanism. The equine hoof is a small, complex structure that actually "pumps" blood back up the leg when the horse is in motion. Muscle movement through exercise keeps the lymph flowing and the lymphatic system operating. This is a system that moves toxins, through the body, toward elimination.

Exercise also promotes what we call "gut motility" in the horse. This means that it keeps things moving through the horse's digestive system. Horses are prone to episodes of colic, which can become deadly, when their digestion slows or they do not drink enough water. Exercise encourages water consumption and the movement keeps the intestines active.

Being able to "let off steam" helps horses maintain mental and emotional health, too. The diet of a horse who is penned up most of the time should be restricted to hay and water only with salt, minerals and probiotics provided. A horse who is working hard, sweating heavily and burning many calories might require grains to provide the needed fuel that hay rations don't quite contain.

If we restrict the horse's natural movement, we will need to provide other ways to exercise him and keep him healthy.

Simple turn out in a large field can create exercise, especially if this is with a group of other horses. A single horse in turn out might simply stand around, so I like to put his water at the far end and if I feed him there, make 3 or 4 piles of hay well spread out.

If a horse is ridden regularly, he should get some good exercise from it. Long, stretching walks on the trail are one of the most beneficial forms of riding. This is especially true if there are up and down hill areas.

"Longeing" is a form of exercise and training in which the horse, on a long rope called a longe line attached to the head collar or halter, circles the handler, working equally in each direction. The handler uses a "longe whip" (we like to call them "wands") as an extension of her arm to point at the horse's body and either send him forward around the circle by pointing at his haunches; or send him out more onto the circle by pointing at his shoulder.

Some horse people "free longe" horses in a round pen without a line attached to the horse. If this exercise is accomplished without aggressively chasing the horse, it can be a training aid as well as a form of needed exercise.

Some of us who have more than one horse can ride out on the trail on a steady mount while leading (it is called "ponying") another horse. This exercises two at once, but the rider must be experienced and the ridden horse must be very calm.

There are some special, essential times when you would restrict a horse's movement such as after an injury or illness when his body must rest for repair. In these situations, your Veterinarian will guide you on the length of the resting time, adjustment of diet to reduce high energy feeds and any medications to support the healing process.

The return to exercise in these instances must be planned and gradual, keeping in mind the energetic nature of most horses and the need for calm handling in safe surroundings. At the Sanctuary, we have rehabilitated many horses from injury

and illness and taking our time, using common sense and patience have been keys to success. Once a horse is sound and healthy, the movement becomes a daily priority once again.

There are a lot of options for keeping a horse moving. The important thing is just do it, just keep the exercise as a priority. The horse in motion is a horse that can be healthy.

